

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Visitor Center and Park Entry Road Realignment Arches National Park

At Arches National Park, the National Park Service (NPS) will construct a new visitor center and realign the park entry road. The current visitor center facilities do not provide adequate space or an appropriate setting for NPS functions such as visitor contact, ranger operations, resource management, interpretive displays and programs, fee collection, and maintenance services. In addition, traffic safety is a critical issue at the park entrance due to limited sight distances for vehicles turning into the park from U.S. Highway 191, poor location of the park entrance sign and photo pull-off area, and inadequate space for queued vehicles at the fee collection station.

An environmental assessment examined four alternatives; Alternative A—No Action; Alternative B—the NPS preferred alternative; Alternative C; and Alternative D. The preferred alternative proposes construction of a new visitor center adjacent to the existing visitor center, which would be remodeled to hold administrative offices and storage. This alternative allows for adequate space within the new visitor center to accommodate current and future projected visitor numbers. It would allow for interpretive displays on important natural and cultural resource topics.

The preferred alternative also proposes the realignment of the park entry road. This realignment would increase safety for vehicles entering and exiting the park, and would provide for adequate queuing room for vehicles at the fee collection booth.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Alternative B—Preferred Alternative

This alternative would include construction of a new visitor center, remodeling of the existing visitor center for NPS administrative functions, and realignment of the park entry road. The completed visitor center complex would be an integration of the new and old buildings. The current visitor center would be converted to office space and storage allowing the new building to be dedicated to visitor functions. This building would be then be linked to the new addition via a display that conceals the existing structure from view. The new visitor center would have a north/south orientation and offer unobstructed views of the scenic cliffs leading to the interior of the park. The new visitor center complex would be 19,473 sq ft (4,618 sq ft for the existing visitor center plus 14,855 sq ft for the new visitor center). The total capacity of the visitor center would be 200 people.

A major feature of this alternative is the remodeling and reuse of the existing visitor center, with approximately 40 percent of the original building maintained. This feature would follow the building reuse standards established by the U.S. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), Green Building System (LEED 2001), and Executive Order 13123, Greening the Government Through Waste Prevention, Recycling and Federal Acquisition. Further, the remodeling of the existing visitor center would be accomplished using natural air circulation and ventilation and sustainable construction materials.

Construction of the new visitor center complex under this alternative would also include construction of a new parking lot that would be located adjacent to the new building. It would be 74,596 sq ft and would accommodate 108 public parking stalls for cars and 15 stalls for

recreational vehicles (RV). Employee parking would be located just to the east of the existing visitor center and have approximately 20 stalls.

Construction of the new visitor center would coincide with the remodeling of the existing visitor center, and would take approximately 12 to 14 months to complete. At the initiation of construction, temporary visitor center facilities would be placed adjacent to the leach field just to the east of the proposed construction site. These facilities would include one 12 ft by 60 ft three-office trailer, one 8 unit restroom trailer, and one doublewide 1,440 sq ft modular structure for the visitor center and retail bookstore. In addition, a temporary gravel parking area would be placed to accommodate 50 vehicles. Temporary utilities would be installed for water, sewer, phone, and computer. The site would encompass approximately 0.5 acre. The temporary visitor center facilities would remain open until the new visitor center complex and parking lot were constructed and open to the public. All areas impacted by the temporary visitor center would be revegetated and restored after the new visitor center is operational.

The park entry road would be realigned to extend the existing park entry road further south and east, along Bloody Mary Wash. The length of the new road would be approximately 0.5 mile.

The proposed entrance would incorporate the following improvements, based on UDOT design standards: minimum of 1,100 ft sight distance; less than 6 percent slope on approach, lighting at the intersection; and enough queuing area onsite so that cars are not backing up onto the highway. This realignment would reduce or eliminate the problem of cars waiting on U.S. 191 to enter the park. It would also move the intersection of the park entry road and U.S. 191 to a location with a much longer sight distance, which would greatly improve safety. Further, the alignment of the proposed road would be placed as close as possible to U.S. 191 to allow the maximum area of bighorn sheep habitat to remain undisturbed.

The total acreage affected under this alternative is approximately 7.3 acres, with 1.8 acres allocated for the new visitor center complex (including 4,618 sq ft for the existing visitor center and 14,855 sq ft for the new building, for a total of 19,473 sq ft) and parking lot, 0.5 acres allocated for the temporary visitor center facilities, and 5 acres for the park entry road realignment.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Alternative A—No Action Alternative

Under the No Action alternative, the NPS would not construct a new visitor center or realign the park entry road. Structures would remain as they are today, with no proposed modification of existing conditions or proposed future management activities under this alternative. There would continue to be overcrowding at the current visitor center facility. Visitors may continue to skip the visitor center and orientation sessions. Traffic on the existing entrance road would continue to back up past the entrance, with cars queuing up along the shoulders of the highway and in the southbound turn lane in the middle of the highway. There would continue to be excessively long lines, which often discourage visitors, who decide to bypass the park or visitor center rather than endure the delay. Further, due to the inadequate building facilities, there would continue to be trampling of vegetation around the existing building. Visitors would be forced to congregate around the building entrance, adjacent to the existing restrooms which are reached by entrances outside the main visitor center space.

Alternative C

Alternative C uses an architectural approach to visitor center design described as an abstract interpretation of the environment. The existing visitor center would be demolished and a new building constructed on the same site. The new building would be approximately 19,298 sq ft. The architectural features of the new building would include undulating roof planes, vertical “fin” walls, and wide-open spaces. These elements would be combined with the use of natural construction materials to give the visitor an interesting and descriptive interpretation of the park. The existing parking lot would be expanded to the west and contain 86 public parking stalls for cars and 8 RV stalls. Employee parking would contain 21 parking stalls.

Alternative D

Alternative D includes building a new visitor center on the site. The new building would be positioned to take maximum advantage of solar orientation and the surrounding views (Figure 2-3). The new building would be 18,610 sq ft. As in Alternative C, the existing visitor center would be demolished in order to construct the new facility. The architecture of the new building is organic in nature. The building’s broad curve would contain the primary functions of visitor information and exhibit space. The exterior courtyard would be a primary feature greeting visitors, while the outer radius of the building would direct visitors towards a spectacular view. The parking lot for this new facility would be located south of the new building, and would utilize part of the existing parking lot. The new parking area would accommodate 86 public parking stalls for cars and 8 RV stalls. Additional parking for staff and service personnel would be located along the western side of the administrative section of the new building and would provide 21 stalls.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferred alternative is determined by applying the criteria suggested in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), which is guided by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The CEQ provides direction that the environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s Section 101:

1. fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
2. assure for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
3. attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
4. preserve important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
5. achieve a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life’s amenities; and
6. enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

The preferred alternative (Alternative B) is also the “Environmentally Preferred Alternative” under CEQ guidelines. Alternative B would have either neutral or positive effect on each of the 6 elements listed above. Alternative B also promotes elements 1 through 6 of the CEQ Guidelines by meeting NPS trustee responsibilities to assure future generations of opportunities for beneficial uses of the environment, while preserving resources and balancing use.

WHY THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

The following criteria were considered in determining whether or not the proposed action would have significant impacts, and thereby require preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS):

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse:

The preferred alternative would not impact special status species (threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species; species of concern; and designated critical habitat); cultural landscapes and historical structures; prime and unique farmlands; air quality; wetlands; land use; environmental justice; the socioeconomic environment; housing; visual/scenic resources; or natural soundscapes. Effects from the preferred alternative on biotic communities, soils, floodplains, archaeological and ethnographic cultural resources, visitor use and experience, park operations, and transportation would be adverse and minor to moderate in intensity.

This alternative would have long term beneficial effects on visitor use and experience, park operations, and transportation. It allows for adequate space within the new visitor center to accommodate current and future projected visitor numbers, and would allow for interpretive displays on important natural and cultural resource topics. The preferred alternative also would also remove a long-standing traffic hazard by increasing safety for vehicles entering and exiting the park, and would provide for adequate queuing room for vehicles at the fee collection booth.

2. The degree to which public health and safety are affected.

The preferred alternative will have positive effects on public health and safety. These include improved sight and stopping distances at the park entrance, elimination of traffic backed up onto the main highway, and improved opportunities for visitor orientation to potential park hazards. During construction, some disruption of normal traffic flow will occur, and will be handled according to accepted construction zone traffic management standards.

3. Any unique characteristics of the area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resource, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

No unique characteristics such as prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic river or ecologically critical areas were identified in the EA as being affected by the project. Proximity of historic or cultural resources is described in the EA.

4. The degree to which impacts are likely to be highly controversial.

No controversial impacts were identified during scoping or during the public review period for the EA.

5. The degree to which the potential impacts are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

No highly uncertain impacts or unique or unknown risks were identified.

6. Whether the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The proposed action establishes no precedent for future actions with significant effects, and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions that may have individual insignificant impacts but cumulatively significant effects. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or breaking it down into small component parts.

The cumulative impacts of the proposed action, including any relation to the proposed widening of U.S. Route 191 or other past, present or foreseeable future activities, were analyzed in the EA. The project was not found to be related to other actions that may have individual insignificant impacts but cumulatively significant effects.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect historic properties in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other significant scientific, archeological, or cultural resources.

The action may adversely affect one historic property, a section of what may be a historical dirt-grade road (circa 1880- 1938) near the proposed new park entrance road. Potential impact to this site from both the U.S. Rt. 191 widening and the park project came to the attention of the NPS after the EA was released for public comment. Every effort has been made by the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) and the NPS to avoid impacting National Register-eligible sites in the project area through alignment adjustments and repositioning of the new park entrance. Limited construction space in Moab Canyon, together with tribal, natural resource, and hydrology considerations, has placed the alignment extremely close to the southeast end of the affected site. At most, the project will directly impact 40 linear meters of this site; at least, development will pose a secondary affect to the site. This results in the NEPA impact intensity level changing from the EA finding of “negligible”, to “moderate”.

The NPS and UDOT have agreed with the Utah SHPO on mitigation measures. The Utah SHPO has concurred with the NPS determination of effect and proposed mitigation for this project, and a Memorandum of Agreement between NPS, UDOT, and SHPO has been signed.

9. The degree to which an action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat.

No adverse effects were identified for any endangered, threatened or sensitive species or designated critical habitat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with this finding, and the concurrence is on file at the park.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The proposed action does not violate any federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

IMPAIRMENT

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the National Park Service has determined that implementation of the proposal will not constitute an impairment to the resources of Arches National Park. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in the EA, the opportunity for public comments, relevant scientific studies and data, and the professional judgement of the decision maker, guided by the direction provided in *NPS Management Policies* (December, 2000). Impacts of the preferred alternative on park resources are expected to be both negative and positive, confined to the site of new disturbance, and of minor to moderate intensity. In all cases these impacts are the result of actions taken to preserve or restore other park resources and values. The severity, duration and timing of impacts associated with this alternative, and their direct, indirect and cumulative effects do not constitute impairment of park resources and values, and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A press release outlining the proposed project and requesting public comment was sent out August 27, 2001, and was published in local newspapers. The scoping announcement and project description also appeared on the park internet website. No scoping comments were received.

The EA was made available for public review and comment during a 30-day period ending May 1, 2002. Notices of availability were placed in local newspapers, and a copy of the EA was posted on the Arches National Park website. One comment letter was received, and contained comments covering a wide range of topics related to Arches NP management. Comments that appear directly related to the content and scope of the EA are addressed in an attachment to this document.

CONCLUSION

The preferred alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an EIS. The preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environmental impacts that could occur are minor or moderate in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or on other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended: _____
Superintendent Date

Approved: _____
Intermountain Regional Director Date

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

One letter was received during the 30-day public comment period. The letter covered a wide range of topics related to Arches NP management, but the following three comments appeared to be directly related to the content and scope of the EA:

1. Comment: No mention in the EA is made of the national register site not far from the present visitor center, the Old Spanish Trail. During the construction period of the new visitor center and the new state highway you are going to have to be alert to possible damage to this important historical site. What are plans to do this?

Response: The Old Spanish Trail site is not within the project impact area, and will not be affected by construction of the visitor center or the park entrance road. The widening of U.S. Highway 191 proposed by UDOT is beyond the scope of this EA, and will be assessed in environmental documents prepared by UDOT. Archeologists hired by UDOT are aware of the site, and will work with the NPS, SHPO and other interested parties to avoid unnecessary impacts.

2. Comment: Evidently it is planned to move the library from the old Rock House to the new visitor center. No mention of plans for the old Rock House are indicated in the EA. What happens to this important historical building?

Response: The custodian's residence, or "Rock House" is addressed on page 1-10, paragraph 1.4.3.2.1 of the plan. The building is outside the proposed project area, and will not be affected. It will continue to be used for administrative offices. The library is currently housed in a separate building next to the Rock House.

3. Comment: What are the plans for the Bates Wilson memorial and the Doc Williams memorial in and near the old visitor center? These are of much cultural interest to "old" Moab, the original supporters of your park and should be addressed in the EA.

Response: Planning for new visitor center exhibits is ongoing, and will include attention to the role of early park supporters and employees such as Doc Williams and Bates Wilson. Details on the design and content of interpretive exhibits are beyond the scope of this EA, and will be dealt with in a separate interpretive planning process.

ERRATA

Site 42GR2813.5

A segment of what may be a historical dirt-grade road (circa 1880 to 1938), or a contemporary berm, is located just north of the proposed new entrance. A Montgomery Archaeological Consultants archeological survey along US Highway 191 for UDOT (UDOT Project Number SP-0191(30)125), suggests this may be a remnant of the “Moab to Thompson Road”. The feature does not appear to retain historical integrity due in part to degradation caused by utilities along the shoulder of US Highway 191, and erosion from Moab Wash. It is the opinion of NPS that it will not supply any additional information beyond what is already available in current literature about transportation through Moab Canyon, and the site does not meet National Register Criteria for Evaluation. However, Sagebrush Consultants L.L.C., documented the site for UDOT in 1998 (report pending; Project No. SP-0191(25)), and Montgomery Archaeological Consultants (Patterson and Montgomery: 2002; Project No. SP-0191(30)125) has determined 42GR2813.5 is National Register eligible. The EA analyzed this site as part of the affected environment, and determined no effect by proposing to avoid it. After the EA was sent out for public review and comment, a potential adverse effect on the site was identified within the project area.

Every effort has been made by UDOT and NPS to avoid impacting eligible sites in the project area through alignment adjustments and repositioning of the new park entrance. Limited construction space in Moab Canyon, together with tribal, natural resource, and hydrology considerations, has placed the alignment extremely close to the southeast end of 42GR2813.5. At most, the project will directly impact 40 linear meters of this site; at least, development will pose a secondary affect to the site. The project is therefore likely to have an adverse effect on this site. This results in the NEPA impact intensity level changing from the EA finding of “negligible”, to “moderate”.

UDOT will implement the widening of US Highway 191 through Moab Canyon beginning in 2003 or 2004, and this future project will also impact 42GR2813.5. The NPS is committed to working with UDOT, the State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and has developed a Memorandum of Agreement to take into account the adverse effect of these undertakings upon 42GR2813.5. NPS believes the site is sufficiently documented (Sagebrush Consultants L.L.C., Project No. SP-0191(25); Montgomery Archaeological Consultants (Patterson and Montgomery: 2002), and proposes no excavation. An NPS engineer and archeologist will monitor the site in the effort to avoid impacts during construction, and monitor impacts should they occur. Temporary fencing will be erected as a barrier to unaffected portions of 42GR2813.5. As further mitigation, the NPS also proposes to display at Arches NP visitor center a temporary exhibit being developed by UDOT about transportation history in Moab Canyon.

Utah SHPO, by a letter dated 5/6/02, has concurred with NPS determinations of effect for this project, and with proposed mitigation measures. A Memorandum of Agreement has been signed by UDOT, NPS and the Utah SHPO.